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Big CIA challenge

Webster must mend ties to Congress

By Jerome R. Watson

Chief, Washington Bureau
Chicago Sun-Times

WASHINGTON—William H. Webster, director of the FBI for the last nine years, faces major challenges as he assumes command of the CIA today.

In interviews, current and former top officials in the U.S. intelligence community agreed that one of those challenges is to rebuild the CIA's frayed ties to Congress, which oversees the agency and must approve its budget.

Capitol Hill had a testy relationship with Webster's predecessor, the free-wheeling William J. Casey, who often was suspected of being less than forthright with Congress.

"Many of us feel we were getting less than the whole truth" from Casey, said Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee. He said a task early on for Webster will be to "have us believe him when he tells us something."

Webster probably sensed the size of the task ahead when he said at his swearing-in ceremony Tuesday that his confirmation hearings had been a tough scrimmage, but "I'm now ready for the main event."

Taking over the post at a time when Congress is investigating a possible CIA role in illegalities in the Iran-contra affair, he sent a signal to lawmakers, the public, and any would-be Oliver Norths when he said the CIA would do its duty "with fidelity to the Constitution and the laws of our beloved country, so help us God."

Casey, who died May 6 of cancer, is credited with doing much to rebuild the CIA—winning larger budgets and increases in personnel since the late 1970s, when the agency was smudged by scandal. But he was faulted for running such covert operations as the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, his possible role in the Iran-contra matter and CIA handling of defectors.

Some reports have suggested substantial CIA involvement in questionable and possibly illegal efforts to aid the contras at a time when Congress had forbidden such assistance. But Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David L. Boren said in an interview that while there are "isolated" cases of individuals being involved, "there's been absolutely no evidence of systematic, institutional involvement by the CIA."

A senior intelligence official said that, besides restoring the confidence of Congress, Webster must cope with a number of major, classified budgetary and policy issues that have "logjammed" since the

Iran-contra scandal erupted.

He said Webster also faces the task of trying to restore the confidence of foreign governments that the United States can keep secrets and "won't imprudently expose our intelligence linen in public." This, he acknowledged, requires curtailing leaks from Capitol Hill, a task that could tax Webster's talents.

Hyde, who has been pushing for a single, House-Senate intelligence committee as one way to reduce the number of lawmakers and staffers familiar with secrets, said that while he faulted Casey for trying to withhold information from the intelligence panels, Casey had reason to fear leaks.

Hyde said that on more than one occasion, highly sensitive information on foreign operations was leaked to the press within hours after the House Intelligence panel had been briefed. "The result was a form of paranoia, where he tried to get away with disclosing as little as possible," Hyde said. "He raised the mumble to an art form."

A former high intelligence official with close ties to Webster said the new CIA boss can be expected to more tightly define "where the line is between everyday operations and covert activities that have to be reported to Congress."

Despite rumors in recent months that Webster would prove antagonistic to covert operations, one intelligence official discounted this, saying, "Would a man who ran Abscam [the FBI's famed sting operation that targeted members of Congress] cut back on covert action?"

The rumors were rooted in Webster's friendship with former CIA Director Stansfield Turner, who ousted hundreds of CIA veterans and was widely perceived within the agency as unsympathetic to covert operations.

But a former CIA director who knows Webster said the new director is "pretty independent," and added, "My impression is, he won't make any facile judgments about the agency. He'll get acquainted with it and make his own judgments without being prejudiced by anyone else's views."

James Nolan, director of the State Department's Office of Foreign Missions and former chief of counterintelligence operations at the FBI under Webster, described Webster as a tough, demanding boss with an ability—honed in his former role as a federal judge—"to get to the core of an issue very quickly."

Nolan said Webster has a knack for assessing subordinates' strengths and motivating them to do their best. He predicted that Webster would not move precipitously to replace senior agency officials.

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